

ALIENATION IN CARYL CHURCHILL'S *A NUMBER*

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***Abstract:** Caryl Churchill's play *A Number* echoes the author's attitude towards scientific evolution, having as a result cloning, and its impact on social and moral values and relationships. The paper will focus on identity problems raised by cloning, on the clash between uniqueness and seriality, on the confusion arising from opportunities and unexpected effects.*

***Keywords:** alienation, British drama, seriality, uniqueness*

1. Introduction

Caryl Churchill's intriguing plays tackle various themes related to identity, social and political contextualization shaping realities around dichotomies such as: rational/irrational, masculine/feminine, past/future or past/present. She has faithfully followed this resourceful and ever twisting axis as a response to contemporary problems and threats, disclosing a critical attitude and a warning against the bending of the conventional "order". Caryl Churchill has created an eccentric enjoying of "the orgy" (Baudrillard 2002:3) and then has simulated the joy stemming from a too easily accepted freedom. While staging a postmodern fractal society, resulting in alienation, the playwright also revives traditional, cultural and social patterns, a sort of "centripetal compulsion" (Baudrillard 2002:5) resonant of man's longing for a referential or traditional supporting centre, which instils the necessary tension.

Various forms of alienation trouble the evolution of Churchill's characters. Starting with *Cloud Nine* (1979) the playwright attempts to reach an extreme situation with Joshua and Betty:

There were no black members of the company and this led me to the idea of Joshua being so alienated from himself and so much aspiring to be what white men want him to be that he is played by a white. Similarly, Betty who has no more respect for women than Joshua has for blacks, and who wants to be what men want her to be, is played by a man. (Churchill, 1999:VIII)

In *A Mouthful of Birds* alienation appears as the abandonment of reason and results in "possession, dream, obsession and other states" (Kritzer in Rabey 2003:136). The postfeminist play *Top Girls* shows a manlike behaviour with women and stages a conflict between women who remained stuck in their domestic, traditional role, and career women who discriminate and disconsider the former.

2. Alienation in *A Number*

Although closely following Churchill's thematic preference, *A Number* undergoes an ongoing process of alteration in both form and ideas. According to Case (2007:159), the play is "not an interactive performance, but a standard two person play that stages the personal, psychological effect of cloning". Yet, the play defies even the modernist standards by abandoning the setting, which implies cultural decontextualisation, and by overstepping Pinter in the ambiguity and scarcity of the dialogue. *A Number* is play-audience interactive, in the sense that the audience has to fill in the gaps in the text, and it also offers glimpses of the social effects of cloning with reference to the father-son relationship and to family relationship in

general. The play attempts alienation at the level of the form, as the traditional dramatic structure into acts and scenes is replaced with non-conventional parts or sections which are equal in importance and form and instil the idea of seriality.

A Number provides the reader with the author's attitude towards scientific evolution, having as a result human cloning, and with the impact it has on social relationships and moral values. Human cloning may cause, in Churchill's opinion, identity problems arising from the clash between uniqueness and seriality, from the difference between normality and artificiality, since the artificially created human being evolves within a false medium with an invented history. Seriality implies annihilation of identity. Thus, the power arising from scientific evolution and the consequent opportunities lead to unexpected effects, eventually demonstrating man's inability to master his creation. By breaking moral and social rules, Churchill's characters become alienated and confused.

Besides the characters' alienation in relation with themselves and with the fictional world in which they act, the authorial alienation during the process of creation, leading to characters as variants of the authors' personalities, as reflections of her sides, can be taken into consideration. Due to the feminist drive in Churchill's works, her having created only men characters may either imply man's inability to master his creation, to overcome difficulties or to replace women, the mother in this case. On the other hand, these men may be seen as hypostases of women, which may suggest both the empowerment of women, who are very alienated and behave like men, resorting to the propagation of the species via cloning, and the impact of a woman's absence in child's or a family's development, an

idea that triggers the theme of women's alienation in *Top Girls*. The play is ironic in Case's opinion:

Churchill's history of writing feminist plays might suggest that this is a strategic irony, in settling a new interactive traffic among females upon the dislodged father-son model that has determined centuries of structural inheritance. In Churchill's play, the mother, the egg donor, is absent. The father is named Salter - only the condiment, but not the meat. (Case 2007:159)

In *A Number* the playwright offers another perspective upon alienation since, by emerging from the scandal of animal cloning, it treats the idea of multiple personalities more concretely by providing more physically identical characters, each having a different personality. The idea of multiple personalities hosted by the same individual becomes visible, as the clones are actually parts of the original, have evolved/grown up from a "speck" or a cell of him, stolen from him, which seems to have amputated his psychic potential, while making parts of it manifest in the clones. The result eventually lies in linear characters that do not know each other and refuse familial relationships.

2.1. Physical Alienation

Monotony and variety coexist in an original way. Only two actors appear on the stage, Salter – the father – and one of his identical "sons". The difference between the sons and the situations is revealed through dialogue. The two characters on the stage are always complementary: B1, B2 and Michael Black are not complex, yet Salter displays different personalities being able to adjust to each of his interlocutors. The contrast between Salter's relatively complex reactions and ability to adjust and his sons

linearity leads to complementariness. Salter's fluid and duplicitous nature increases the sons' incertitude and creates a sort of discomfort with themselves as they have no fix centre to hold on. This situation is the outcome of ambiguous genealogy and of physical alienation.

Bernard's surprise at his having been cloned reminds of Fowles's work *The Aristos* and the state of being nobody through physical alienation. According to Fowles (1970), each part of his body has its own identity and can be perceived in itself (as an entity), has its independence. Similarly the speck taken from Bernard's body stops belonging to him and becomes an entity. In a way, it is implied that each cell encompasses an individual and can evolve independently into one. Thus, the play suggests the idea of a multiple mirroring of the individual in him/herself, of deconstruction and alienation. Besides, the text raises the problem of a person's rights over his/her own body and the legal framework that can hinder someone from stealing physical identities. A house or a garden, Fowles (1970) states, is legally owned while there is no contract to assure one's ownership over the cells of his/her body, especially at a very early age. When a person perceives his/her body as made of "specks" which can be estranged or sold, then s/he gets aware of his/her physical alienation. B2 and Michael Black are concrete examples of physical alienation and of the potential latently resting in each cell or "speck".

The traditional and direct father-son interdependence and consubstantiality is annihilated as the father loses his role in the process of conception/creation. Such a scientific discovery makes the notions of "father" and "mother" obsolete. B2's being born in a laboratory makes him different from the people he assumes he knows, and everything around him

becomes uncertain. He also realizes that his father is not so much physically related to him.

As regards Salter, he is baffled when he is told that there are more than one clone, but he does not reveal any real concern about his son's traumatic experience. He accepts his status as a father of all his sons although he had naturally fathered only one of them and had ordered only one clone. Consequently, he has a very strong sense of his physical ownership and is very pragmatic. Salter assumes that his being the father gives him any right upon his son: including the one to clone him and the right to abandon him. Salter's right over his sons, which is not exercised aggressively and against their will, should not be perceived in the sense of the ancient Greek tragedy, but in a more contemporary way, which makes the father treat his sons as commodities or things. The biological link is altered when Salter chooses to have a copy of his son, made of his son's flesh. B2 and all the other clones are not really his sons in a traditional and natural way.

Besides, the father-son relationship is altered when Salter measures his "sons" in money, he considers them "things", although they are living beings, and they get a price. Their physical status undergoes alienation due to the production: B2 and Michael Black become series products deprived of uniqueness. Although Salter does not reveal any awareness, by cloning his son he abandoned his physical ability to be the father and he got physically alienated, too. The irony of the play rests in the fact that the empowerment induced by scientific discovery cancels both the authority and the power to create of the father through externalization.

2.2. Psychic Alienation

Psychic alienation is related to the multiple personalities as a result of the contrast between the sons' physical similarity and their psychic dissimilarity. This implies the fact that any individual encompasses latent personalities or sides which may be manifest or not, depending on the situations s/he experiences. Alienation is also obvious through alteration of feelings and emotions within the same individual: B2 chooses to leave the house when he realizes he is a number.

Caryl Churchill proposes a paradoxical change of values: alienation as a feeling of not being part of a group appears here as a result of the characters' suspicion of belonging to another group. The character's alienation is the result of a shocking discovery of having lived in a lie, which raises the problem of his identity, not only physical, but also cultural.

Brought up within a traditional context, though incomplete as his mother had died, B2 feels his identity threatened by the existence of the others because of two reasons: 1 – he may be one of them, a clone, which means that his father is not his biological father and his mother is just an invention, he has no family as he was conceived in a laboratory; 2 – he may be the original and, in this case, his uniqueness has been altered and/or stolen apparently without his father's consent. He does not know whether he should blame his father, the doctors/scientists or both. He remains without bearings: confused and scared at the beginning.

B2 no it was stupid, it was shock, I'd known for a week before I went to the hospital but it was still

Salter it is, I am, the shocking thing is that there *are* these, not know how many but at all

B2 even one

Salter exactly, even one, a twin would be a shock

B2 a twin would be a surprise but a number
Salter a number any number is a shock (11)
 [...]
B2 what if someone else is the one, the first one, the real one and I'm
Salter no because
B2 not that I'm not real which is why I'm saying they are not things, don't
 call them
Salter just wait, because I'm your father
B2 you know that? (Churchill 2002:11-12)

B2's experience has alienated him from people and from his family, he starts reconsidering his life by other criteria: real versus not real; normal versus artificial; facts versus verbal reassurance. When his father tells him "I'm your father", B2 cannot believe him. Unable to answer who he is and what he is, feeling insecure in the street and at home because of B1's aggressiveness, B2 resorts to isolation. His newly created inner void determines the need for a new space, an alien environment, a place to hide, more appropriate for his new identity.

B2 yes I know what you mean, I just, because of course I want them to be things, I do think they're things, I don't think they're, of course I do think they're them just as much as I'm me but I. I don't know what I think, I feel terrible. (Churchill 2002:12)

As far as B1 is concerned, his trauma is much deeper and has been endured for 35 years. He was abandoned by his father and replaced with B2, who was, according to Salter, the child that he wanted. B1 was perfect, probably physically, but he used to cry and was very demanding. B2 was tidy and good, obedient and easy to manipulate, he was the opposite. In his conversation with Salter, B1 is domineering and determined, radical and

aggressive, threatening and enraged due to his stolen childhood, home and family, and probably genetically violent, which makes him follow and kill B2 and himself.

The fact that Salter keeps saying that he wanted B1 to be cloned because he was perfect increases the bafflement, as B1 does not know his father's reasons, and Salter's arguments rest on a contradiction. It is curious that B1 chooses to punish B2 and himself, both of whom are actually the victims of his father's decision. Salter tells him: "It wasn't his fault, you should have killed me, it's my fault you." (Churchill 2002:51) Salter is very direct and harsh with B1 revealing him his feeling:

I could have killed you and had another son, made one the same like I did or start again have a different one get married again and I didn't, I spared you though you were this disgusting thing by then anyone in their right mind would have squashed you ... (Churchill 2002:51)

Salter as a more complex character, yet not fully developed in the play, bridges the past with the present: from a common family with a single parent to a harmonious and uninteresting new family – Michael's. Although at the source of the tragedy, Salter remains passive pretending bafflement, he avoids telling the truth and continuously adjusts the speech to respond the interlocutor. When he speaks with B2, Salter is domineering and manipulative, distracting B2's attention from his identity problem and lying to him. The conversation is fragmentary and repetitive suggesting the characters' groping for a meaning and Salter's obvious effort not to directly contradict B2. What really baffles him is related to money: he sees the clones as a source of money because the scientist produced more than one. He tries to convince B2 and B1 to sue the hospital for having damaged their

uniqueness. Salter turns out to be an alienated father, insensitive to his sons' needs, and ready to accept new discoveries and experiments without pondering on the possible consequences: what he did was not a trivial thing. Salter also represents the father who feels threatened by his son B1, who is very demanding, and abandons him, which is a substitute to killing him, reminding of King Laius.

2.3. Social Alienation

As mentioned before, within the established limits, the play helps the audience distinguish between the sons through their core emotions expressed in their conversation with Salter, through their stories and through the way in which they behave in this small social group. Their identity is externalized from the body to the text they produce, the only indicator of their identity. With Norbert Elias the body and its natural resources come first, before spoken language, in the process of communication (Elias 1991 in Shelling 2003:201). With Caryl Churchill, the body does not communicate the identity due to the similar physical appearance and to the absence of stage directions in this particular case. Besides, the reader is faced with a tense moment in the father-son relationship, which makes him get a distorted and focalized image different from the everyday social characters. Chris Shelling (2003:196) mentions that sociological research considers that "the body as a phenomenon is simultaneously biological and social. (...) The body is seen as 'unfinished' at birth, an entity which changes and develops throughout an individual's life." Social and cultural factors contribute to the construction of one's identity. The twentieth century emphasis on the body is shifted from the biological to the social in *A Number*, as the difference between identical bodies with the same genetic

inheritance arises from the social and cultural context in which they have evolved. Although all the sons are biologically related to the same degenerate father, they are different. B1, who was abandoned and has dark memories of his parentless and loveless childhood, is aggressive and envious on B2, who was made to replace him. B1 kills B2, avenging his years far from his father and punishing his father by taking away the substitute. B2 lacks the sense of belongingness and has a weak personality, as he was the amorphous matter Salter moulded to his wish. By losing the certitude of his origin, B2 has also lost his identity, which shows a socially inadapted being. Michael Black, the clone that had never met Salter is balanced and has a harmonious, although boring, life. He proves that one's identity is not necessarily biological, but social and cultural.

3. Conclusion

As a message, the play is similar to Huxley's *Brave New World*, warning us against the unexpected, traumatizing effects scientific evolution can have and implies that once the process began, it can no longer be controlled or stopped. It also shows that the alienation problem is a relative one, as it is closely related to the social and cultural background of the individual experiencing alienation. B1 and B2 who evolved within a false and traditionally enwrapped context, being educated in the sense of a father-son lineage, cannot cope with the situation. Michael Black is educated and brought up as a clone, therefore he behaves accordingly and accepts the technological evolution that makes him a number. He complies with the social rules and does not reveal intense emotions. His acceptance of his serial existence results in what Salter considers trivial identity, a number without anything special.

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